

VZCZCXRO7247

RR RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDBU RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA
RUEHLN RUEHLZ RUEHNP RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHRS RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHBW #0467/01 1521148
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 011148Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY BELGRADE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1328
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RHEHNS/NSC WASHDC
RUZEJAA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 000467

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SR](#) [KV](#)

SUBJECT: SERBIA: PATRIARCH REMAINS BUT SYNOD REVAMPED

REF: 08 BELGRADE 1217

Summary

¶1. (SBU) During its annual spring session from May 14-22, the Holy Assembly of Bishops (Sabor) of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) stood firm in its stance that ailing Patriarch Pavle should fulfill his lifetime appointment. The Sabor also confirmed that Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Coastlands will continue to head the Holy Synod, the church government, in the absence of the Patriarch. However, in a move that likely portends growing recognition within the Church that fresh perspective is needed, the Sabor elected four new members of the Synod, including 41-year old Bishop Grigorije of Zahumlje and Herzegovina and 47-year old Bishop Fotije of Dalmatia. During one of its more results-oriented sessions in recent times, the Sabor also considered the situation in Kosovo, restitution, and relations with the broader Orthodox Church community. End Summary.

Sabor Stands Pat on Pavle but Overhauls Synod

¶2. (SBU) In the run-up to the Sabor, there was renewed speculation in the press whether the session would be dominated by debate over whether to replace Patriarch Pavle, as in November 2008 (reftel). Most attention, however, focused on the Holy Synod - the church government - since all of its members' two-year mandates had expired and therefore were due to be replaced.

¶3. (U) Learning a lesson from its last session, the Sabor acted quickly to address the Patriarch's future. On May 15, newly reappointed SOC spokesman Bishop Irinej of Backa issued a statement that the Sabor had decided to stand by its previous decision to request that Patriarch Pavle fulfill his lifetime appointment. The statement explained that the Sabor reached this decision only after considering the situation created by the lengthy illness of the Patriarch, hospitalized since November 2007, including the functioning of church bodies. According to press reports, only 15 of 35 bishops with voting rights supported placing succession of the Patriarch on the agenda, far short of the required two-thirds supermajority.

¶4. (SBU) The Sabor did, however, end with a bang as one of its final decisions on May 22 concerned the appointment of four new members of the Synod. In addition to Bishop Irinej of Backa and Bishop Irinej of Nis, considered part of the older guard in the Church, the Sabor tapped Bishop Fotije of Dalmatia (47) and Bishop Grigorije of Zahumlje and Herzegovina (41) to join the Synod. Bishop Hrizostom of Zica and Bishop Hrizostom of Bihac and Petrovac were appointed as reserve members. Although his mandate expires this year, the Sabor chose to allow Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Coastlands to remain as head of the Synod, in effect extending his mandate indefinitely.

¶5. (U) Citing Fotije and Grigorije's relative youthfulness by Church standards, religion experts openly debated whether the appointments were a harbinger of change. In an interview with "Blic" on May 24, sociologist Mirko Djordjevic stated that the new composition of the

Synod "awakens hopes that the younger bishops will offer new ideas and new approaches, in particular as regards ecumenism. This in practice would mean that the Church would turn away from clericalism and toward the state and European integration." However, Dr. Zorica Kuburic, professor of philosophy at Novi Sad University, told "Borba" newspaper on May 25 that she remained skeptical, arguing that there will not be drastic changes in course because even the new Synod members "belong to the Church system."

Kosovo and Bishop Artemije Figure Prominently

¶6. (U) The May 23 final communique on the results of the Sabor suggested that the session also focused heavily on the situation in Kosovo, including the role played by Bishop Artemije of Raska and Prizren, a divisive and nationalist figure whose diocese includes Kosovo.

¶7. (U) The communique emphasized that the Sabor "dedicated its utmost attention to the status of the Church and people in our southern province after the illegal declaration of Kosovo's independence." It praised the GOS' efforts to halt and prevent this "flagrant lawlessness" and its consequences in the face of "cold and indifferent silence of the most powerful and outspoken defenders of human rights." It noted that the Sabor met with Minister for Kosovo Goran Bogdanovic and presidential advisers Mladjan Djordjevic and Damjan Krnjevic-Miskevic to coordinate policy and expressed confidence that Serbia and the Serbian people "will never accept the violent seizure of Kosovo."

¶8. (U) As proof of its intent to move from words to action, the Sabor appealed to Bishop Artemije to accept control of religious sites in Kosovo damaged during March 2004 violence and rebuilt with the help of the international community. The Sabor stressed that

BELGRADE 00000467 002 OF 002

successful completion of this process, which eventually would involve more than one hundred churches and monasteries, would create sustainable conditions for the priesthood and encourage Serbs to return to their homes in Kosovo. "Blic" daily reported on May 24 that the Sabor gave Artemije, who vehemently opposed the 2005 memorandum on renewal signed by the SOC and the Kosovo Ministry of Culture, until the end of May to soften his stance or face disciplinary proceedings.

Artemije Causes Trouble

¶9. (U) Bishop Artemije also was at the center of two controversies that came to light during the Sabor and worsened his already strained relations with the Synod. On May 20 he publicly announced his refusal to "bless" Vice President Biden's visit to Visoki Decani monastery, stating that the visit "confirmed the violent seizure of a part of Serbian territory and its handing over to terrorists who went unpunished for carrying out countless crimes against the Serbian people, property, and cultural heritage." The Sabor reacted immediately, adopting a decision to "annul" Artemije's decision, which it characterized as "counter to traditional Christian hospitality," and criticizing his rhetoric.

¶10. (U) The verbal fireworks between Artemije and the Church continued following a May 21 report in "Vreme" weekly, which alleged that patients at a drug addiction treatment facility near the Crna Reka Monastery close to Novi Pazar were "healed" through beatings with shovels and other inhumane treatment. The video Vreme used as a basis for its story has now been viewed over 30,000 times on youtube. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etEGO2e9At8>). The Synod called for Artemije to close the facility immediately and to initiate proceedings against those responsible, including its director, Father Branislav Peranovic. Artemije hit back through the media, denying any connection between Crna Reka and its brotherhood and the Spiritual Rehabilitation Center for Treating Addiction and alleging that this incident was "brought out of mothballs" to discredit him. Artemije, who finally relieved Peranovic of his duties on May 27 but refused to close the center itself, also speculated that it was possible that Washington had exerted influence on Belgrade to pressure the Synod in response to

Artemije's opposition to the Vice President's visit.

Restitution and Church Relations

¶11. (U) The Sabor also considered less sensational but critically important issues such as restitution and relations with the broader Orthodox Church community. In particular, the Sabor expressed interest in intensifying the restitution process foreseen for nationalized church property. It welcomed progress in overcoming differences with the Orthodox Archdiocese of Ohrid, represented at the session by Archbishop of Ohrid and Metropolitan of Skopje Jovan and bishops from the Ohrid Archbishopric, but singled out for censure the "anticanonic and unbrotherly activities of certain representatives of the Romanian Patriarchy in eastern Serbia." (It is not yet known what activities the Sabor was referring to.) The Sabor also adopted a decision confirming the SOC constitution in North and South America and enacted a new administrative structure for eparchies based in Libertyville, Illinois; Third Lake, Illinois; Pittsburgh; Los Angeles; and Toronto.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) Judged against an admittedly indecisive past record, the recently-concluded spring session of the Holy Assembly of Bishops was productive. Rather than becoming bogged down on internal divisions, it addressed pressing issues such as restitution and the appointment of new members of the Holy Synod. Its selection in particular of two relatively young members raised expectations that the Church may begin to emerge from the stasis caused by the Patriarch's absence. End Comment.

MUNTER